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Joint written statement* submitted by Al-khoei Foundation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status; World Federation of Khoja Shi'a Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[17 February 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

The rise of religious intolerance and sectarianism

The Al-khoei Foundation is an international charitable organisation, founded in 1989 by the late Shia Muslim spiritual leader Ayatollah Al-khoei, which has had General Consultative Status with ECOSOC since 1998. The Foundation works to promote the freedom of religion, tolerance, respect and justice for religious groups worldwide and actively supports all initiatives that foster peaceful co-operation and friendship between different religious and non-religious groups.

The Foundation works at local, national and international levels for the education and welfare of Muslim communities by running schools, educational and community centres. We also undertake grassroots work such as chaplaincy in hospitals and prisons. We initiate projects which promote the empowerment of women and youth, and undertake international work on development, human rights and research into the protection of sacred sites during times of conflict. We participate in and sponsor many interfaith and intrafaith initiatives which bring communities together and are signatories of international faith declarations such as the Amman Message (2004) and the "A Common Word" initiative (2007). We also work hard to raise standards and promote interfaith dialogue in national forums, such as the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board in the UK, and have helped spearhead initiatives such as the Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue in Iraq.

The Foundation is deeply alarmed by the rise of religious intolerance and religious sectarianism worldwide. The Foundation unequivocally supports the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the enshrined principles within the Charter of the United Nations and international law. We are increasingly concerned that faith communities and peoples across the world are being oppressed by severe restrictions, face discrimination on the grounds of their religion and beliefs - running directly counter to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - and that many are also subject to gross violations of their human rights.

When religious and sectarian tensions proliferate, it is necessary to ask where such hostilities have emerged from. Increased sectarian tensions often emerge in societies where the rule of law has broken down and there is a lack of accountability of governments and authorities. In such situations, governments and political parties may irresponsibly resort to igniting or encouraging sectarian tensions in society for their own benefit. Creating sectarian strife for political gain greatly hampers processes of peace and reconciliation, creating hostile environments for pluralism and mutual coexistence, which multireligious and diverse societies depend upon for stability.

The Foundation is also deeply concerned over the rise of extremist militant groups across the Middle East and wider Islamic world and beyond, particularly Al-Qaeda affiliated networks and others groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The Foundation has been involved in research into the use of social media platforms and dedicated television channels which spread hate speech, violent ideologies and sectarian incitement. In Libya, an Iraqi professor who confirmed he was a Shia on one such channel was later executed. The research has shown this is an increasingly alarming trend, which is also contributing to the ongoing spillover of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon and Iraq. We are deeply concerned about the worsening sectarian conflict in Syria, the plight of its more than two million refugees and the likelihood of sustained violence and civil war. We call on all parties involved in the conflict to work towards a political settlement and to avoid targeting the places of worship and heritage of different faith communities. We are especially concerned about churches and the Sayeda Zainab shrine in Damascus and possible attacks on this important religious symbol.

In Pakistan, the Hazara Shia community, an ethnic and religious minority, has been the victim of a sharp resurgence in sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing, leading to targeted killings and the deaths of nearly one thousand civilians since 2012. Multiple militant groups have been blamed for the violence, with attacks often increasing in the holy month of Muharram. Doctors and lawyers in Karachi have also been the victims of targeted killings. This is alongside rising religious intolerance against other minority faith groups in Pakistan, such as the Ahmadiyya, Christian, Sufi, Zoroastrian and other religious communities. The Christian community are frequently targeted, especially through their places of worship, such as the Church attack which led to the deaths of almost eighty people in Peshawar in September 2013. We urge the Pakistani authorities to take a leading role in protecting the Hazara and all other minority faith communities in Pakistan and to ensure that targeted violence and human rights abuses aimed at civilians are halted.

Malaysia is a multiracial and multireligious society, yet, despite enshrining freedom of belief and religion in its Constitution, the Al-khoei Foundation has received numerous reports that there is a growing stigmatisation and increasingly harsh sectarian treatment of minority faith communities. Shia Muslims, who are a small minority in the country, have been actively discriminated against since a fatwa was issued on May 5 1996 which labelled Shia Islam as a "deviant" ideology, and has now been implemented in eleven of Malaysia's fourteen states. According to sources, there have been crackdowns against the Shia community since 1997, with Shias facing arbitrary arrest, attacks on private property and the prohibition of publishing and distributing Shia Islamic materials. The rise in religious intolerance which extends beyond the Shia community was also demonstrated by the October 2013 ruling that non-Muslims cannot use the word "Allah" to refer to God, which the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief spoke out against in November 2013.

The Foundation believes that intolerance towards religious groups contravenes Malaysia's own national laws and many international statements Malaysia has shown support for, including the Amman Message of 2004, the Islamabad Declaration of 2007 and Article 22 of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration of 2012. These worrying trends and the legalised persecution of minorities, which harm Malaysia's image as a tolerant, fair and open country that respects human rights, should be reversed by the Malaysian government and monitored by the international community.

In Bahrain the long-persecuted Shia community have been victims of a sharp increase in attacks on religious freedom. In response to widespread protests, the authorities have demolished places of worship (although a small number have been rebuilt), sacked Shia workers and students, suppressed religious processions and have now dissolved the country's main Shia organisation, the Islamic Council of Scholars.

In Egypt, a vicious attack against Shia Muslims in June 2013 highlighted a worrying trend of religious intolerance against the small Shia minority at a crucial time in Egypt's political transition. The brutal lynching of four Shia Muslims by a mob of over one thousand people in the village of Abu Musallim in Greater Cairo came after months of denunciatory statements and hate speech from some political and religious leaders. However, we welcome the swift condemnation of this attack by Egypt's Al-Azhar clerics. Shia Muslims in Egypt are increasingly at risk of attacks on their beliefs – as they are frequently deemed to be heretics – and on their personal safety. Campaigns against Shia Muslims are part of wider trends of religious persecution in Egypt, and we condemn the ongoing attacks on Egyptian Coptic Christians and their property, as well as the targeting of other religious minorities. Since the June 2013 military coup, we have also been particularly concerned about the gross human rights abuses that have been meted out by security forces against civilians.

In Myanmar, sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing has continued against the minority Rohingya Muslim community, which the UN has deemed one of the most persecuted populations in the world. Since violence first broke out between Buddhists and the Rohingya community in mid-2012 more than two hundred people (who were overwhelming Rohingya Muslim) are reported to have been killed and over one hundred thousand Rohingya remain displaced. The Rohingya community's lack of recognition by the Burmese government as a "national race", having been stripped of citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law, has enabled opponents of the Rohingya to deprive them of basic human rights. The Al-khoei Foundation strongly encourages the Burmese government to re-institute the Rohingya community's status as full citizens, to protect the Rohingya from future violence, to conduct full investigations into violence against minorities- such as an outbreak of violence against the Rohingya in January 2014 that left around forty dead- and to work with religious communities within Myanmar to ameliorate current tensions.

The sectarian violence and human rights crisis in the Central African Republic, which began in December 2012, is a matter of great urgency for the international community. The Al-khoei Foundation condemns all sectarian violence taking place.

Sectarian violence and hatred in Iraq continues to pose serious threats to the country's political stability. The Al-khoei Foundation condemns sectarian violence in Iraq from all parties, in the wake of the bloodiest year and highest losses of human life since 2008, resulting in between seven thousand and eight thousand deaths. We call for all sides to come together in peaceful reconciliation and for faith leaders in particular to take a stand against the ongoing cycle of violence. It is unfortunate that Iraqi government officials, both Shia and Sunni, use sectarianism to mask their own failures in providing basic services to the people.

Iraq's highest Shia authority, Ayatollah Al Sistani, recently released a statement strongly condemning sectarian violence against both Shias and Sunnis. We see a strong need for faith leaders to push for stronger restraint within their own communities when violence, hate speech or sectarian intimidation are carried out by their own followers. Faith leaders worldwide are in a unique position to provide moral and spiritual leadership in times of conflict and of peacebuilding, and to directly help heal divisions in society which are beyond the political realm. We call for faith leaders to be part of the solution, not the problem.

In the United Kingdom we have had good experiences of raising standards within places of worship by having well-produced intrafaith and interfaith guidelines and Codes of Conduct, which have actively contributed to reducing religious tensions. Religious communities can be brought together for common causes, such as issuing statements of solidarity in response to violence and terrorist incidents worldwide. Internationally, the coming-together of Islamic states for the Amman Message (2004) and the Islamabad Declaration (2007) were a show of great unity from the Muslim world, and we would urge for more such unified events to take place in future and for signatories to adhere to the declarations.

Accordingly, there are a number of additional suggestions the Al-khoei Foundation would like to make to the following parties:

To the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief:

- To continue to speak out for the rights of religious minorities and sects which are victims of ongoing persecution, violence and human rights violations.
- To call for deeper investigation into the situations of the peoples we have highlighted in this statement as experiencing human rights violations as a result of their religion.

To States:

- To protect and to further extend dialogue, respect and tolerance towards their minorities and faith communities.
- To pass legislation criminalising the use of public forums for hate speech.
- To declare all places of worship and sacred sites of each and every faith, denomination and belief as inviolable neutral ground at all times, not to be threatened, damaged or desecrated but to be protected and preserved.
- To call for thorough investigations into reported human rights violations occurring within their country.
- To use religious education to teach and celebrate the variety of the world's religious faiths and not just preach one version of any religion to their entire populations.